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THE NATIONAL EARLY LITERACY PACT IN BRAZIL: ASSESSMENT OF WRITING IN THIRD GRADE CHILDREN

Leonor Scliar-Cabral

Universidade Federal de
Santa Catarina, Brazil

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Abstract: I will analyze the results of the National Pact for Early Literacy (Ministry of Education, 2012) regarding writing, released by the National Early Literacy Assessment (hereinafter ANA, INEP, 2015), in Brazil, in order to discuss the situation of the early literacy program and to identify aspects of the tool, with regard to writing. I will then discuss the categories of written production that were taken into consideration by the ANA, when verifying the competence of students in the 3rd year of Elementary School, according to the processes involved in written textual production, from the point of view of psycholinguistics, with recent contributions from neuroscience.

CATEGORIES ANALYSED WHILE PRODUCING WRITTEN TEXTS BY ANA

The (ANA) “is an external assessment that aims at assessing the levels of early literacy in Portuguese (reading and writing) and Mathematics by students in the 3rd year of elementary education from public schools” (INEP, 2013, p.1). Only what concerns writing will be commented on. See what was evaluated and how:

The ANA written production items required the writing of two words and a textual production. The skills assessed in the ANA written production items were:

- Spell words with canonical syllabic structure;
- Spell words with non-canonical syllabic structure;
- Producing a text based on a given situation (INEP, 2013, p. 1).

Note that the text production was restricted to narratives. Regarding statistical criteria, for writing “a scale was established whose mean value is 500 and the deviation default 100, with 500 representing the average distribution

of proficiencies of students in the 3rd year of regular elementary education in public schools in 2013” (INEP, 2013, p. 2). The results were grouped into four levels for writing, defined below:

Level 1, up to 400 points (cutoff point): They write words with canonical (consonant and vowel) and non-canonical syllables, with some difficulty and even words, orthographically, with canonical syllables. It can be seen in Table 1 that 11.64% of children did not manage to surpass Level 1, that is, the WORD writing level, and the 11.64% included both those who could only write one syllable and those who did not write anything.

Level 2, greater than 400 points and less than 500: There is an inconsistency in the ANA description when it states “consisting of only one sentence; producing narrative texts, based on a given situation” (INEP, 2013, p. 8), as it is practically impossible to produce a narrative with just one sentence, even if they have the laconic competence of Caesar when narrating: “I came, I saw, I won” (although, for the completeness of this narrative, it is still necessary to add the scenario: “Julius Caesar, when crossing the Rubicon, uttered”). Still, when characterizing Level 2 as: “they show absence or inadequacy of formal elements (segmentation, punctuation, spelling, verbal agreement and nominal agreement) and textuality (cohesion and coherence), still showing a distance from the standard norm of the language”, the ANA demonstrates that it is repeating labels in vogue, because, evidently, a single sentence lacks the property of textual coherence, besides that verbal agreement and nominal agreement are nothing but aspects of cohesion and not isolated grammatical aspects.

Level 3, greater than 500 points and less than 580: Children write narrative texts with more than one sentence, with better adaptation to segmentation, verbal and nominal

agreement, although with some commitment to formal elements and textuality, evidencing an approximation to the standard norm of the language (INEP, 2013, p. 8). Note the imprecise categorization and, again, the contradiction between “better fit to verbal and nominal agreement” and “commitment to textuality”, since better adequacy to verbal and nominal agreement is the primordial component of cohesion and, therefore, cannot coexist with “commitment to textuality”.

Level 4, greater than 580 points: Produce narrative texts, based on a given situation, adequately attending to the use of textual elements, evidencing compliance with the standard norm of the language (INEP, 2013, p. 8). It is inferred from this categorization that the child must have already reached full competence to write narrative texts, according to the standard norm of the written language.

Chart 1, Summary of the Writing Scale below (INEP, 2015, p.15), differs from the number of levels presented by INEP in 2013, as it adds one more level. The inconsistencies are the same, aggravated by the fact that each of the categorizations was preceded by the word “probably”, which increases the degree of uncertainty in the results presented.

CATEGORIES LISTED BY ANA AND WRITING PROCESSING

In order to understand what skills are necessary for written production and, therefore, the bases that must guide the teaching-learning process of early literacy for textual production, it is necessary to monitor the processing of written production and, particularly, the differences between the processing of reading and writing and between the processing of oral production and writing.

In the first case, the crucial difference, with profound repercussions on processing and learning, is that, in the case of reading, the reader must recognize the written word

in a text that is already ready, whereas, in the case of writing, it is up to the writer planning how he/she will transpose his/her states of consciousness into the text, in order to achieve pragmatic purposes.

Such computations must take into consideration numerous variables such as the purpose of the text, the addressee (if private or public; status; age group; sociolinguistic variety), genre, topic and support, as they will determine the writing style or register, with the choices about syntax and lexicon to be used.

In the differences between the processing of oral production and that of canonical writing, there are those that oral production occurs with the interlocutors sharing space-time coordinates and, often, the empirical and cultural context, which does not happen in canonical written production, when the writer produces for a future reader who is spatially absent and even unknown. Such a distinction implies that the competent editor must supply in writing the spatial and temporal context and all the information necessary for the reader to be able to efficiently retrieve the references: the gesture of pointing is innocuous in written communication.

There is no mention, in the categories of ANA, to these tremendous difficulties with which the apprentice of writing is faced at: the categories listed demonstrate that its authors ignore important steps of writing processing, that is, the initial milestone in which the brain works to prepare the concept map from a communicative intention to produce a written text (definition of the topic, choice of gender and registration, as a function of the reader's conditions: the message, the steps of communicative intent and planning.

It must be clarified that the expression Level of the Message (Garrett, 1980), where the meaning is generated, is the label that will be preserved by Levelt and colleagues (1999).

WRITING SCALE					
LEVEL	%BR	WORD			TEXT
		Word	Relation of phones	Phoneme/ grapheme	
1	11,64	None	Some	None	none or illegible
2	15,03	They write words alphabetically with changes or omission of letters, changes in the order of letters and other spelling deviations.			none or illegible
3	7,79	They write orthographically* words with a consonant-vowel syllabic structure, with some spelling deviations in words with more complex syllabic structures.			They write in an incipient or inappropriate way to what was proposed or produce fragments without connectors and/or lexical substitution resources and/or punctuation to establish articulations between parts of the text. They also present large number of spelling and segmentation deviations.
4	55,66	spelling for writing *			They meet the proposal of giving continuity to a narrative, although they may not contemplate all its elements and/or parts of the story to be told. They articulate the parts of the text with the use of connectors, resources of lexical substitution and other articulators, but still commit deviations that partially compromise the narrative meaning, including not using punctuation or using them inappropriately. The text may present some spelling and segmentation deviations that do not compromise the understanding.
		words with different syllable structures.			
5	9,88	Words orthographically written with different syllabic structures, with some deviations.			They meet the proposal of giving continuity to a narrative, highlighting a central and final situation. They articulate parts of the text using connectives, lexical substitution resources and other articulators. They segment and write the words correctly, although the text may present some spelling and punctuation deviations without compromising the understanding.

Chart 1, Summary of the Writing Scale (INEP, 2015, p.15)

It is necessary to be careful not to confuse “Message” with the same term when it is used as a translation of utterance, or when it is part of R. Jakobson’s model of language functions.

The Message Level, in the verbal production models, means the highest and abstract level when the concepts that will later be lexicalized and inserted in the syntactic structures are gathered.

The second stage, when linearization (syntaxization) and translation of concepts into lexical items occurs, is briefly and confusingly referred to by the ANA evaluators. It must be noted that the taxonomy used by the ANA, opposing WORD to TEXT, already demonstrates the conceptual flaws in the classification: it is inferred, from the hyponyms placed in the WORD column, that the 3rd grade children writing competences evaluators were not examining whether the children were already correctly translating the concepts into lexical items, nor clearly defining the beginning and end of the word, as the hyposegmentation errors were listed in the TEXT column.

In fact, they were referred to in the column called WORD, some skills related to graphemic coding (a concept that supporters of the Psychogenesis of Writing ABOMINATE), such as “Writing alphabetically”, “Writing orthographically”, “consonant-vowel syllabic structure” and “more complex syllabic structures”, without it being clear what they mean by “They write alphabetically”, since no evaluators’ knowledge is inferred about the Brazilian Portuguese alphabetic system principles (Scliar-Cabral, 2003).

The confusions and taxonomic gaps are flagrant in the ANA evaluators’ categorization: suffice it to say that in the TEXT column (which must include textualization categories, such as message level, syntax, concepts translation into lexical items, thematic progression and monitoring) they consigned the most

processing peripheral categories, such as, motor execution, when they mentioned “illegible”, although while classifying children belonging to the same Level 2, in the WORD column, they had consigned: “They write alphabetically with words exchanges or letters omission, changes in the letters order and other spelling deviations”. One wonders how they reached that conclusion, if the text was illegible. They also repeated categories that they had already placed in the WORD column, such as “spelling deviations.”

Examining more deeply the categories listed in the TEXT column, its fragmentary and contradictory character is detected. In addition to the already mentioned fact that the evaluators only assigned one genre, the narrative, it is not known in detail how it was elicited, nor whether if it is a fictional or factual narrative. There is a lack of explicit references to the children’s mastery or not of the narrative structure, episodes made up, which have their respective scenario, characters and events, interconnected by connectives that would indicate the logical relationships type, such as, for example, causality, consequence, addition, etc.

The category “score to establish articulations between parts of the text” marks another constant generality in the ANA. The evaluators ignore that punctuation, except in direct speech (dialogues), when the expressive function prevails, are, above all, syntax graphic marks. For example, the dot marks the period or sentence ending and the comma, the coordination between terms or phrases with the same syntactic function within the clause or between clauses with the same syntactic function within the sentence. Commas also mark the beginning and end of an interpolated term and cannot separate the subject from the predicate. Thus, one of the didactic flaws in teaching punctuation is when the teacher naively recommends to children: “When you

make a pause, put a comma.”

Another category that deserves further study is that of “segmentation deviations”. Without the reviewers going into detail, such deviations could be hypo- or hyper-segmentations. In the first case, the individual fails to put the blank space that separates two words in the written text, as in the example “o mar”/ “umar” (a similar example in English would be “aneyé” instead of “an eye”). This stems from the principle that we produce and perceive the speech chain as a continuum and the unstressed words (clitics) are phonologically dependent, in Brazilian Portuguese, on the next word that has the syllable of greater intensity. Furthermore, clitics are always purely grammatical morphemes, as an example, the singular masculine definite article “o” (Eng. the) above and do not have a concrete referential counterpart, so the child analyzes “umar” as a unit.

An example of hyper-segmentation occurs when the word ends with a consonant and the next starts with a vowel: the consonant migrates to the next syllable, becoming the onset: “olhos azuis”: “zazuis” (in Eng. A similar example would be “the eyes are”: “zare”). There was a hyper-segmentation in “os” (in Eng. in “es”) and the plural morpheme migrated to the beginning of the next word, losing its function: a new word was formed, probably the one that the child has in his mental lexicon, that is, /'zɔjU/ (in Eng. /zar/). The so-called “phonetic writing” is nothing more than the approximate translation of how the word is “heard” in the mental lexicon by the child.

The above phenomena were mentioned for the first time by Hindu phonetics, receiving the name of external sandhi (in Portuguese, “sândi”). In contemporary linguistics, they are called a closed external juncture.

FINAL COMMENTS

It has not been easy for scientists to develop production models of written texts: they faced several methodological difficulties, from the elaboration of experimental designs that could empirically test the mental representations that govern how the pragmatic intentions of producing a text are initiated, how the meanings to be lexicalized are generated, in short, all processing steps up to the execution that externalizes the text, this last one, yes, more accessible to experimental inspection. Opposing theories explain the format itself of mental lexicons and their recovery, thus giving rise to divergent experimental models.

The data analyzed by the ANA (INEP, 2015), despite all the conceptual and taxonomic problems of categorization, are important to assess the levels of writing performance in Brazil: they have been very low. I presented the results of the National Early Literacy Pact (Ministry of Education, 2012) regarding writing, published by the National Early Literacy, in Brazil and the categories of written production that were taken into consideration by the ANA, when verifying the students' competence in the 3rd year of Elementary School, observing the processes involved in the written textual production, from the point of view of psycholinguistics, with the recent contributions of neuroscience. I demonstrated that they were not included in the categories listed by the ANA to assess children's writing competence who completed the 3rd year of Elementary School in Brazil.

The evaluation tool revealed theoretical and methodological flaws, as it did not take into consideration, the skills needed to plan and supervise written production, being limited to a single genre, narrative. The categories were not very explanatory to evaluate. However, the robustness of the data allowed us to draw a worrying profile of Brazilian children who completed the three-year early literacy cycle

in public schools. It was, according to Foraque (2015), a population of 2.3 million children, of which 34.46% only managed to scribble and to produce fragments (of these, 11.64% wrote absolutely nothing). Only 9.88% demonstrated the ability to write a complete story and 55.66% could outline the narrative progression, but with inconsistencies and poor scores. The fact that this last group presented hyposegmentation allowed us to infer that one of the biggest problems in its production resided in the difficulty, in the narratives, to contrast the presentation of new characters and scenarios with the information already introduced. Undoubtedly, at the heart of this desolate picture, are the foundations where systematic education begins: the early literacy. How early literacy is learned “and how

it is used determines its value to the learner” (UNESCO, 2014, p. 19).

The seriousness of the problem demands the convoking of all those who, although aware that there are deep structural causes that are beyond their intervention, could contribute to lessen the perverse effects of an outdated education, based on myths and prejudices without any coherent scientific foundation.

Above all, specialized teacher training is needed, the adoption of methods that benefit from the most recent discoveries in language sciences, including neuroscience, and the production of pedagogical material by equally prepared authors who, at the very least, know that Brazilian Portuguese does not have only five oral vowels, a, é, i, ó, u, as proclaimed in the carnival song.

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